

Democratic D.C. mayor slashes funding for homeless services in midst of surging pandemic

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Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser's administration has moved to cut funding for homelessness services in Washington D.C., in the midst of a severe housing crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The cuts will force nonprofits that serve the homeless to drastically reduce their operations, with devastating implications for those that they serve, even as the pandemic continues to surge in the city.

According to the *Washington Post*, in November, the District of Columbia's (D.C.) Department of Human Services (DHS) asked organizations they fund to "identify areas of savings." Emails stated that D.C. DHS would cut grants by 5-10 percent as part of a Bowser administration campaign to address "intense budget pressures," with the city facing an estimated \$200 million budget shortfall.

In June 2020, the head of D.C.'s Interagency Council on Homelessness expressed concern that "it would be hard to imagine a scenario that we won't see an increase in homelessness" due to the pandemic. Months later, the Washington area was breaking records for its highest daily confirmed cases since the start of the pandemic. D.C., a city with an estimated population of over 700,000, has reported at least 34,259 cases and 861 deaths. An annual survey by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments found that 6,380 people were homeless in the district at the beginning of 2020.

Directors of homeless services organizations fear that increased demand due to a rise in homelessness and budget cuts will burden already struggling agencies. Ruby Corado, founder and director of Casa Ruby, which provides housing and other services to LGBTQ people and receives DHS grants, told the *Washington Post* that "the decision to reduce already thin budgets [that] help keep people alive in this city is out of touch with reality."

Casa Ruby faces grant reductions of over \$170,000,

which would force cutbacks in staffing and service to the over 200 young people they provide shelter, food, and emergency services to daily. Corado added that the organization, which employs 126 staff, would likely have to cut 20 people if the cuts go through.

June Crenshaw, executive director of the Wanda Alston Foundation, which also serves homeless LGBT youth, fears that service reductions may lead youth to act desperately to "stabilize their circumstances," according to the *Post*. Many youth supported by her organization have previously relied on underground economies, including sex work, to support themselves.

The DHS recommended that SMYAL, which provides transitional housing to 26 people aged 18-24 among other services, cut both of its housing grants by more than \$50,000. SMYAL Director Sultan Shakir told the *Post* that he was "incredibly shocked" at the notification. "There's no way to cut 5-10 percent out of a program during a pandemic and not have it negatively impact the level of service that you're able to provide."

"It's so arbitrary how they're making the cuts. They're not using standardized measures to make these decisions," Natasha Guynes, president and founder of HER Resiliency Center in a comment to *WAMU*. While Democratic Party politicians posture as the defenders of "diversity" and marginalized groups, their treatment of the poor in the US capital demonstrates their complicity in attacks on living standards of all poor and working people in the country, regardless of race, gender or ethnicity, in the service of the rich.

Bowser's ruthless policies towards the most vulnerable layers of the population are a far cry from her 2015 promises of making homelessness "rare, brief, and nonrecurring" by 2020. The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments reported last year that

homelessness across the country could skyrocket by over 40 percent as more families lose work and are unable to pay bills during the pandemic. In June, the head of DC's Interagency Council on Homelessness said, "It would be hard to imagine a scenario that we won't see an increase in homelessness."

In 2019, the D.C. Homeless Youth Census counted 1,328 unhoused young people in the city. According to the *DCist*, while measuring youth homelessness is difficult, the count was "up relative to each of the three previous years."

True to form, Bowser prioritizes business interests over those of her working class constituents, even when they need assistance most. Recently, this manifested in the council deferring coronavirus economic relief for undocumented workers while bailing out the semipublic entity that operates the city's convention centers and sports stadiums.

The cuts to homeless services come in stark contrast to the Bowser administration's decisive action taken to prop up businesses. In 2018, Bowser and the Democrat-dominated council rejected Initiative 77, a ballot measure that would have removed the minimum wage exemption for tipped employees even as the measure passed with 55 percent public approval. Councilmembers repealed it in favor of a bill that appropriated funds for projects that never materialized.

As the pandemic surged, the city government withdrew \$80 million from reserves to establish a "bridge fund" between federal employer relief programs. Homeless shelters are left to wonder: Why do they face cuts while businesses get payments from the city reserves?

Additionally, Bowser headed the dangerous push to reopen D.C. public schools to facilitate the return of parents to unsafe workplaces. Her agreement with the Washington Teachers Union was struck on the same day that she ordered the closure of "nonessential" businesses.



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